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ABSTRACT

A copy of a letter to a cable company, printed in large block letters and not following standard rules of spelling and syntax, serves as a catalyst for thoughts about the person who wrote the letter and a discussion about what constitutes literacy. Despite the appearances of the letter, a case can be made for the author as a writer. A close look at her spelling, grammar, syntax, punctuation, vocabulary, voice, and pragmatics show that her rhetorical skills are better than those of many college students. Syntactically, the letter contains some surprises. The first sentence contains two subordinate clauses and two infinitive phrases. Its author's grammar contains several nonstandard phrases characteristics of Black English. Punctuation is idiosyncratic but consistent. Rhetorically, the letter is a good example of business writing. According to most functional criteria, the writer would be considered moderately literate, although she never attended school. Her case raises serious questions about how teaching literacy is approached in primary and secondary schools--what is it in schools that grinds down self-esteem and discourages a student's inherent abilities. Teachers must learn to look beyond errors, to stop equating literacy with knowledge of standard conventions. Too often feedback focuses too much on correctness and not enough on problem solving. In the case of the elderly writer of this letter, she had a long working life as a cook or dietary worker at hospitals. She is clearly successful as a writer/reader. (TB)

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'I Don't Write, I Print': A Case Study in Literacy.

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"I Don't Write, I Print": A Case Study in Literacy

A cable television company in Texas recently received this letter:

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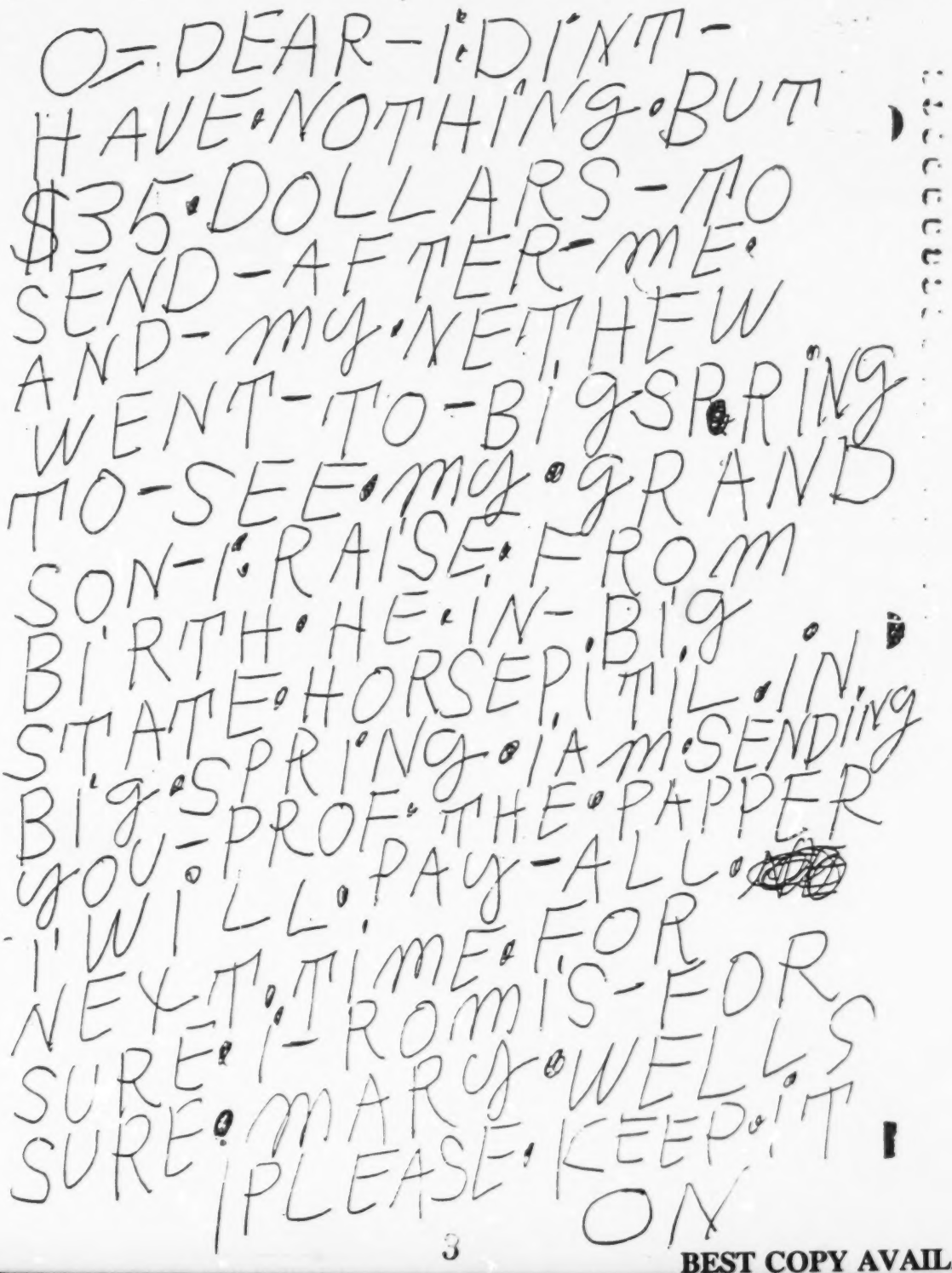

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The people in the cable office thought the letter was hilarious and joked about it all day. Some felt sorry for the writer, obviously a customer. "She's illiterate. Can't write," they said. "That's so sad." A few insisted that the writer was at least technically literate, because otherwise she could not have written a letter.

One look at the letter explains such reactions. The large block printing is childlike and reminiscent of the printing taught in kindergarten. The letters fill up all the available space on the page. Even without the misspellings and unconventional punctuation, the letter would be difficut to read.

Linguistically, however, the letter is worth examining in more detail. By looking at the spelling, grammar, syntax, punctuation, vocabulary, voice and pragmatics, we can make a case for this writer. Her self-taught rhetorical skills are better than those of many college students, as we shall see.

Orthography. Mary prints most letters of the alphabet in large block capitals. Exceptions are m, g, and y, which she always writes in cursive form, though without limking letters. One wonders whether the cursive m and y date from a time when Mary was learning to sign her name. Mary seems to use only one form of each letter, each of which is drawn painstakingly. The P's and T's, for example, are remarkably similar from one to the next. There is a reason for the similarity, as we shall see. As for the dotted i's, perhaps Mary knows the maxim and obediently dots all her i's and crosses her t's, though as capitals, the i's don't need dotting.

One gets the impression that Mary works through her sentences very carefully, word-by-word and letter-by-letter. The case of the word "[p]romis[e]" toward the end of the letter is particularly noteworthy. The P is not really omitted. Mary printed a P first but then turned it into an R, the next letter of the word; since one usually forms R's from P's, this was a natural mistake. She made the same mistake, but caught it, the first time she printed "Big Spring." It seems that a large part of Mary's conscious control over writing is bound up in letter formation.

Spelling. Mary's spelling shows that she knows how to spell many common words and that she deals with unfamiliar words phonetically. Notable are her accurate spellings of "dear," "dollars," "birth," and "please." She includes the silent "e" of "have," "raise," and "time"; she misses it at the end of "promise." "Hospital"(horsepitil), "nephew" (nethew) and "didn't" (dint) are misspelled, but in ways that may reflect the pronunciation of those words in her dialect. "O(h)" and "pro(o)f" are essentially missing silent letters, and "pap(per)" has an extra syllable, possibly denoting the Texas accent: pay-per.

Syntax. Syntactically the letter contains some surprises. The first sentence (through "birth") contains two subordinate clauses and two infinitive phrases. The third sentence ("I am sending you proof--the paper") contains a progressive verb form and ends with an appositive. Her sentence complexity and variety belie the simplistic visual appearance of her letter; it is more advanced syntactically than the writing of most first-year college students.

Grammar. Mary's letter displays several nonstandard forms that are

characteristic of black English: the double negative ("I dint have nothing"), the omission of the tense marker "d" from "raised," and the omission of the "to be" verb in the second sentence ("He [is] in the big state horsepitil in Big Spring"). These deviations from standard English are all typical dialectical variations. That is, we would expect Mary to consistently deviate from standard English in the ways that she does here. These are not random errors, but standard features of her dialect. Conventional schooling could have ironed those out, but may also have caused her to feel much less secure in her ability to write.

Punctuation. Mary follows idiosyncratic but consistent punctuation conventions, separating her words with either a large dot or a dash. At the beginning of the letter, she uses a double dash, and to indicate her postscript she draws a vertical line. The dot above each i is almost always slightly above and to the right of the letter--her logical conclusion to dotting the i--she was using lined paper and there was no room above.

Voice. It is difficult to get past the unschooled block print and odd punctuation to focus on the letter's rhetoric and content on order to get some sense of the writer behind the words. Reproduced below, with spelling and punctuation standardized, but with the language and grammar preserved, is Mary Wells' letter.

> Oh, dear: I didn't have nothing but $35 to send after me and my nephew went to Big Spring to see my grandson I raised from birth. He['s] in [the] big state hospital in Big Spring. I am sending you proof: the paper. I will

pay all next time, for sure. I promise. For sure.

Mary Wells

[P.S.] Please keep it on.

This version of the letter is much easier to understand, though we still recognize that it is not quite normal. "Oh, dear" is not an accepted saluation, for example, though perhaps it should be, when there is bad news to relate. The letter is now very like typical customer correspondence. From context, we would understand that Mary Wells is making a partial payment on her cable bill and is asking the cable company to continue her service. From context we would also understand that "the paper" attached is some sort of doctor's note or hospital receipt.

Rhetoric. In many ways, the letter is a good example of business writing. The letter is direct and avoids passive form. The writer's purpose is clear, if not explicitly stated. And she makes several effective rhetorical appeals, using pathos, for example, both in her salutation and in her description of her grandson's condition. She makes an ethical appeal in her emphatic promise to pay the complete bill next month. The letter closes exactly as a business letter should: with a clear request for action.

Though the letter was written by someone with very little schooling, and less knowledge of writing conventions than most children, the writer's linguistic knowledge is fairly sophisticated. Her syntax is complex, she understands the rhetorical dimensions of her situation, and she knows how to get to the point in a letter.

What should we then conclude from Mary's letter? Who is she and where does she come from? What does the letter say about Mary's ability to read and write? Is she truly illiterate? Does Mary's letter have anything to say to us about the amount of conventional knowledge (such as standard English usage, punctuation, spelling, correct letter format) that people need before they can use language to reach self-directed goals?

First, Mary Wells is not illiterate. But even many of us who are educated in language and literacy may have a hard time seeing that. Combined with the unorthodox block printing, all the grammar errors make it almost inevitable that readers will not take Mary's letter on its own terms, much less recognize that it is persuasive and that its content is appropriate to the situation.

At the time Mary Wells was interviewed (May, 1992) she was 73 years old and living in west Texas with a grandson in his early twenties. She had lived the first part of her life along the Texas/Louisiana border in a migrant black family who were existing by picking cotton. She had no formal education, like most migrant workers, but credited the "white lady on the big farm" for schooling her a bit. "She taught me right along with her own children." Unfortunately the migrant farm work brought Mary to west Texas and away from her brief encounter with formal literacy.

Mary's lack of formal education explains the appearance and nonstandard conventions of her letter. Yet, for someone who is almost completely self-taught, Mary writes surprisingly well. Other than business correspondence, like this letter to the cable company, Mary writes letters to her family and

friends. She knows that her writing has limitations: "I don't write. I print. When I need an important letter written someone does it for me, or if I don't feel well, I tell them what to write."

Mary Wells can read, like most of us, at a higher level than she can write: "I read the Bible, every day . . . I read newspapers, when they give them to me free. I read magazines when they send them to me. I read my mail." The Bible is an especially complex text, not one that we would expect a marginal reader to tackle (though, of course, it has been used as a reading primer for centuries). Some of Mary's letters show that her writing may have been influenced by the Bible. Notice the exaggerated serif style on the "T" and the elaborated capital "S" just as one might find in the fancier Bibles, at the beginning of some paragraphs, when the first word is "The" or "So" or Sayeth." These and other aspects of Mary's writing challenge some of our common assumptions about literacy and schooling.

Definitions of literacy. Mary Wells' letter is an interesting test of the way we define literacy. Though Mary meets the literal definition of literacy--knowing her letters--she knows only one form of each. It is not obvious how should would be categorized in the various levels and ways of defining literacy. Literacy can be seen as a developmental skill (the grade level notion of literacy), or as a knowledge of conventional usage (didn't instead of dint, for example), or as a functional ability to use written and spoken language to accomplish goals (understanding and using rhetoric to achieve a purpose).

Literacy as a skill. Demographers who define literacy as being able to

read and write "at the fourth (second, third) grade level" see literacy as a developmental skill. Mary said that she reads newspapers, magazines, and the Bible, but we really don't know how well she comprehends what she reads. Her writing looks like a first- or second-grader's work, but she displays more awareness of audience and purpose in her writing than do many first-year college students. The grade-level approach to literacy does not work with Mary Wells.

The skills approach implies that literacy follows the same path of organic development in every person. It suggests that people can and should be classified by ability level based on reading tests and writing samples. In Mary's case, such a classification would be nonsensical and would serve no useful purpose. How can one say that Mary has a second or third grade level of literacy when she was able to support herself in a career of hospital work "doing most of the jobs there at one time or another"?

Literacy as knowledge of conventions. More popularly than professionally, there is a tendency to associate literacy with knowledge of standard conventions of language use. Noguchi, for example, shows that people typically identify dialect variations and status-marking errors when asked to identify the kinds of grammatical errors that bother them. When people use nonstandard English in their speech--when they say "aint" or "had went" or use double negatives--the popular tendency is to label them illiterate. This tendency is even greater when people make mistakes in writing. Mary Wells' misspellings, use of double negatives and other grammatical lapses, her ignorance of letter-writing conventions, and her childlike block printing all

label her as illiterate to those who associate literacy with Standard Written English.

Literacy as functional ability. It is becoming increasingly common to define literacy as a functional ability, an ability to do things with reading materials (see Robinson; Szwed, Hunter & Harmon). People are considered functionally literate when they can extract information from texts and when they can accomplish practical life tasks like totalling a checkbook, reading a newspaper, or filling out a job application. Despite her untutored, unconventional printing, Mary's ability to write a letter to solve a problem ranks her above-average in functional literacy, according to one study by the Educational Testing Service and National Center for Education, entitled Adult Literacy in America.

A functional definition of literacy is the ability to hold a job. Mary worked for four or five different hospitals during her working life, usually as a cook or dietary aide. "In those days you didn't need experience--you just had to be a hard worker." Mary's description of her work shows that she had functional skills. She was able to learn and perform a variety of tasks. "We didn't have enough workers and I had to do all the jobs sometimes." That included cooking, serving, ordering kitchen supplies, going to the store, and planning menus. When she had problems reading or writing on the job, Mary would get help from a co-worker: "I would ask Miss Alice, and then after that I would remember it."

According to most functional criteria, then, Mary would be considered a moderately literate adult. She reads for pleasure and information, she was

employed and supported herself throughout her life, and she writes for social and business purposes. Readers might be surprised to learn that Mary has even tutored others: "I helped my children and grandchildren with reading and writing," she told us.

In functional terms, Mary is clearly successful as a writer and a reader, though she came alarmingly close to being "prisoner of silence." In his book of the same name, Kozol describes what he calls the "pathology of illiteracy," which is like an illness which cripples the lives of those who suffer from it. Virtual slaves in the few low-paying jobs they manage to get, illiterate people are passive and powerless citizens in our cuture, unable to make claims within society or to achieve personal goals. They are "Men and women [who] have been left to see their deepest dreams and most abiding hopes go down the drain of joblessness, of silence, of despair" (xiii).

Though Mary could have ended up that way, she did not. She is not the desperate and powerless illiterate Kozol describes. Though poor, never having opportunities for education or advancement, Mary has made the most of her limited access to the written word. She is a reader and a writer. She has held jobs. She is empowered enough to use writing to accomplish her goals, despite what her writing looks like. Mary is the surprising unschooled literate, a person who has emerged out of limited opportunity and still less education, having somehow gained the power to consume and to use the written word.

The pathology of schooling. Mary Wells' ability in overcoming illiteracy makes us question the education system. She understands the

essentials of rhetorical purpose and audience and has empowered herself to use them even with her limited linguistic skills. She shows a confidence in her ability to communicate that she probably would not have retained in an English class, turning in "a paper like this, calling for help in every direction at once," as Weiner might say (Writing Room 4), to a teacher who would think her writing "disturbs, threatens, and causes despair" (Connors 5). Why has Mary learned, by herself, with fewer writing skills than most, what many in school have not?

Though Bloome points out that "in Western Societies literacy and schooling seem inseparable," Mary is an exception--she has avoided school. The example of Mary Wells makes us ask what it is about schooling which grinds down the self-esteem and discourages one's inherent abilities? According to Adult Literacy in America, in the U.S. up to 25% of high school graduates are a considered functionally illiterate, having reading skills below the sixth grade level. And they have certainly developed, by then, an aversion to writing--and still don't have a clue about rhetorical purpose, audience, and persuasion. What does school do to these students that all Mary's years of hard work and deprivation did not do to her? Why haven't 9 to 12 years of school taught these people what Mary has figured out largely on her own: that reading and writing are useful tools, and that even rudimentary mastery of rhetorical skills can help us accomplish personal goals?

A large portion of the blame may rest on us: teachers of English, teachers of reading, teachers of writing, preservers of the language--destroyers of dreams? Have we, as primary, secondary and high school English

teachers, failed young writers by confusing literacy and ability to use the language with knowledge of the conventions of writing? If Mary Wells can become empowered to use reading and writing with confidence in her life, then so should every one of our students. When we give up on them, it is we who fail; when we stress errors in their writing, and the product instead of the process, we disempower them. By obsessing on their errors, we tell them they cannot do things with writing, when obviously they can. Mary Wells did.

There are things we can do in our classrooms to empower our writing students, like taking the focus off their error, realizing as Shaughnessy has tried to tell us, that error shows growth and is normal in their attempts to learn. We need to praise our student writers. Look beyond their errors. Any teacher of writing whose students feel less competent after taking their writing class should consider looking for a new profession, before too many more young learners are damaged. If Mary Wells can develop her communication skills on her own, then our students surely can, with our help. And not just the better ones. All of them.

We've got to encourage them, praise their skills, and stop the tendency to equate literacy with knowledge of the standard conventions of written and spoken English. Criticism and condemnation for their errors will not encourage growth in student writers. Those at the bottom need encouragement even more than those at the top.

Too often, our feedback to students focuses too much on correctness, and not enough on problem solving. Our emphasis on conventions and our students' failure to adhere to them demoralizes students, convinces them that they

cannot master literacy, and tu.ns them off to reading and writing.

If this criticism of conventional teaching methods seems too harsh, go back and look at Mary's letter.' How many of us would praise this letter, recognize its success from a functional and rhetorical point of view, or see it as the example of empowerment and self-actualization that it really is? In attempting to squelch her errors, would we criticize her dialect and her self-identity too? As Weiner points out, teachers of writing "too often perceive their instructional audience as damaged" ("Perspectives on Literacy" 16). He says we must keep our eyes on the potential of students and recognize and build on their latent abilities.

How many of us could respond to the unconventional aspects of Mary Wells' letter without discouraging her, or giving up on her as a writer? I am ashamed to say I have discouraged writers more competent than Mary by telling them to go get help with their spelling and grammar and come back to me with a revision that I could read. I still have to put my pen down and force myself to read my students' drafts all the way through to the end before I discuss them, in writing or better, in person.

What we need to do as teachers of writing according to Kozol, Weiner and others, is create conditions that lead to student success. Perhaps look at each student as a potential Mary Wells. Mary has faith in herself and in her abilities as a reader and a writer. She knows she can accomplish things by writing, and because she knows, she does. We need to give our students a similar faith in their ability to write. Because we seem to have a tendency to overvalue schooling and undervalue literacy, the case of Mary Wells gives

us an invaluable opportunity to step back and reconsider our attitudes about both. How is it that Mary Wells did so much with such rudimentary skills? Could it be because she never had an English teacher? How is it that only 49% of Americans are functionally literate? Could it be because of schools? Creating a more literate generation of Americans may be as simple as changing our attitudes toward them.

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